

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 882

CS 501 333

AUTHOR Swanson, David L.
TITLE Some Theoretic Approaches to the Emerging Study of Political Communication: A Critical Assessment.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Portland, Oregon, April 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Politics; *Research Methodology; Research Needs; Speech; *State of the Art Reviews; *Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Political Communication

ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the state of political communication as an emerging multidisciplinary effort and discusses two major varieties of political communication theory and research. The first section of the paper discusses the "effects" research tradition in mass and political communication, examines the impact of critiques of this position, and discusses the manner in which the effects tradition is perpetuated in some current research. The second section characterizes the uses and gratifications approach as an alternative to the effects position, describes its advantages and difficulties, and evaluates its usefulness as the new political communication paradigm. The final section of the paper discusses two priorities in research and theory development for the future. These two priorities include the importance of conceptual analysis, and perceptual and interpretive processes. (TS)

* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *

ED120882

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

SOME THEORETIC APPROACHES TO THE
EMERGING STUDY OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION:
A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

David L. Swanson
Department of Speech Communication
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPY-
RIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

David L. Swanson

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING
UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL IN-
STITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRO-
DUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM RE-
QUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT
OWNER.

A paper presented at the
1976 International Communication Association Convention
Portland, Oregon

CS 501 333

Variously conceived, most of the phenomena which intrigue students of political communication have been the subject of forty years of empirical research throughout the social sciences. It is only recently, however, that political communication has begun to emerge as a field of study with some claims to independence from the academic disciplines which nurture it--chiefly political science, mass communication, and, more recently, speech communication. Those claims to independence rest principally on what is taken to be the unique focus of political communication study: the role of communication in the process whereby persons may come to exercise the role of citizen, including such activities as learning and executing political roles and duties, selecting holders of political offices, participating indirectly in the formation of public policy, and influencing the institutions of government. While all the social sciences are more or less interested in parts of this process, each approaches it from the vantage point defined by its disciplinary commitments; none takes understanding the role of communication in the process as its ultimate commitment and defining attribute.

Because political communication researchers have come to suspect that disciplinary commitments may confine rather than facilitate understanding their subject matter, the field of political communication is emerging as a multidisciplinary effort. It is not a discipline; its program, perspectives, and methods transcend the boundaries of the disciplines upon which it draws. Hence, political communication is defined and guided by the phenomena it seeks to explain rather than by the manner of its explanation. As a result, the field of political communication is exceedingly diverse in its theoretic formulations, research questions, and methods of inquiry.

This very diversity, combined with the still emergent character of the field, makes the task of assaying the "state of the art" doubly difficult. Yet it seems worthwhile at this early stage in our development to seek some general assessment of what we have accomplished and what our priorities should be for the immediate future. This paper adumbrates such a general assessment in a discussion of two major varieties of political communication theory and research, the continuing "effects" tradition and the rise of the uses and gratifications approach.

Two caveats are in order, of course, flowing from difficulties endemic to such efforts. First, in the interest of economy, the level of the discussion is general and its focus is selective. Attention centers on two major theoretic frameworks; specific research projects housed within those frameworks receive general characterization rather than detailed analysis. Second, the interpretation offered in this paper is necessarily a personal one. The paper is, in fact, a truncated argument in support of the two priorities for theory evaluation and development urged in its concluding section. Full elaboration of the premises of the argument, including its assumptive context, is, of course, extraneous to the purpose of this general assessment.

The paper proceeds chronologically. It first discusses the effects research tradition in mass and political communication, weighs the impact of critiques of this position, and comments upon the manner in which the effects tradition is perpetuated in some current research. Second, the uses and gratifications approach is characterized as an alternative to the effects

position, its advantages and difficulties are described, and its credentials as a candidate for the new political communication research paradigm are evaluated. Finally, two priorities are drawn from the discussion which may productively inform future theory development and evaluation.

The Research Tradition and the Critique of Logical Empiricism-Psychological Behaviorism

The political communication research tradition stands at the confluence of two related but distinct programs of theory and research: the study of voting behavior, exemplified in the pioneering efforts of scholars at Columbia¹ and, later, at Michigan,² and the study of the effects of mass communication, ably characterized in Klapper's influential summary and synthesis.³ Conceived and conducted during the heyday of behaviorism throughout the social sciences, each of these elaborate research programs was behaviorist in constructing persons in essentially physicalistic terms, as passive responders set in motion (to emit voting behavior, for example) by potentially identifiable causes of motion (such as campaign propaganda). Mentalistic constructs (attitudes and the like) were treated as mediating variables in the cause-effect sequence, and the underlying image of persons informing the research model was decidedly passive-mechanist. Similarly, the two research programs were logical empiricist in deriving their understanding of social science from the goals and methods of the natural sciences. Voting behavior and communication effects research were committed to the logical and methodological symmetry of natural science and social science, to the deductive-nomological view of the scientific enterprise, to the operationalization of theoretic concepts in critical tests.

These research efforts produced, in the voting studies, an impressive array of demographic and attitudinal correlates of voting behavior, along with skepticism over the ability of political communication to meaningfully affect electoral choices. Attitudes were explained by loose notions of consistency and dissonance which have since become outmoded in social psychology, and selective exposure was invoked to account for the relative impotence of counter-attitudinal messages. The mass communication effects studies also engendered mounting pessimism over the efficacy of political persuasion. This pessimism was manifest in the retrenchment from the hypodermic needle model to the limited effects position and the "law of minimal consequences."

In retrospect, the 1960's and early 1970's loom as a period of general stock-taking under the scrutiny of which the political communication research tradition did not fare well. Objections to the traditional research program which, for the most part, had been voiced much earlier found forceful and influential advocates. Mass communication researchers had sought to document the persuasive power of mass media since the First World War. These persuasive effects, which had for so long seemed intuitively obvious but empirically elusive, now seemed entirely chimerical to many. Berelson and others argued that the search for mass communication effects as traditionally conceived had shown itself to be an exercise in futility and had produced little of value.⁴ Such respected spokesmen as Katz⁵ and Klapper⁶ called for a dramatic reconceptualization of the relation of mass communication to its audiences and for a program of research not based on the effects model.

Simultaneously and on a wider stage, logical empiricism, which formed the conceptual foundation for traditional research, was coming under increasingly strident attack throughout the social sciences. O'Keefe has cogently summarized the more powerful arguments advanced against the logical empiricist conception of the social scientific enterprise.⁷ While we need not restate those arguments here, we should note their effect. Suppe has termed the logical empiricist conception "a view abandoned by most philosophers of science" and spoken of its "general rejection."⁸ Substantial doubt has been cast on the traditional view of social science as an enterprise seeking to explain, predict, and control events and on its deductive-nomological apparatus.

The reign of behaviorism throughout the social sciences was also seriously challenged. Critiques suggested the ambiguity of what had hitherto been regarded as clear supportive evidence and diagnosed the consequent feebleness of the position.⁹ On a more abstract plane, writers in each of the major disciplines participating in the field of political communication have objected to the passive-mechanist view of persons on which behaviorism was based--such advocates as Mendelsohn in mass communication,¹⁰ Gunnell in political science,¹¹ and Delia in speech communication.¹²

While the controversy surrounding the assumptions and methods of traditional social science, including traditional political communication research, is continuing and will no doubt be with us for years to come, one effect of the dispute is of special interest here. Political communication researchers have become divided into two general groups, one group which is either unimpressed by the critique or not cognizant of it, and another group which has found the critique more or less persuasive and cast about for an alternative conception. It is these relatively distinct groups of scholars which constitute the field of political communication today.

The former group--those unaffected by the critique of the traditional conception--continues to pursue the research questions which have historically engaged political communication students, using the conceptual and methodological tools of that tradition. Studies of the effects of persuasive political commercials, surveys of political attitudes, communication exposure, and voting behavior, and the like continue to be with us and doubtlessly will be an important part of the field throughout the foreseeable future.

A recent development in what might be called the "new effects research" is the use of quite sophisticated methods of data analysis, including, as the best example, causal modeling.¹³ Causal modeling techniques, especially as applied to political communication, are yet in their infancy, however, and it is too soon to assess the contribution to understanding they might make. In evaluating the new effects research, it is important to remember that statistical techniques are precisely that: they are procedures for analyzing data, not theories. And to the extent that these methods perpetuate a conception of social science which has been severely criticized and have been grafted onto theories many of us would now reject--reducing human understanding to the mass and motion of beliefs in multidimensional space, for example--their potential seems limited. If critiques of the traditional political communication research model are to be taken seriously, as many have, the prognosis for genuine advances in understanding growing out of

research based on that model--including the methodologically sophisticated new effects research--does not appear to be particularly good.

The intellectual vitality of the field is, for the most part, found in the efforts of the latter group of researchers, those who have cast about for alternative ways of understanding political communication. The 1970's have thus far been rife with heady talk of new perspectives and promising but as yet unexplored theoretic formulations in political communication, as in the social sciences generally. It is to an examination of the most popular of these alternative conceptions that we now turn.

The Uses and Misuses of Uses and Gratifications

At the same time that the traditional communication effects research model was being indicted, the case for an alternative research model was being made. While the details of the model were never very clear, its general approach appeared to be functionalist, and its advocates included Katz,¹⁴ Wright,¹⁵ Klapper,¹⁶ and Mendelsohn.¹⁷ Of course, functionalism had been popular in a number of disciplines since it arose in French sociology and was finally elaborated in British social anthropology. The functionalist approach enjoyed brief currency in American communications research, especially in the 1940's,¹⁸ and was notably pursued by a number of attitude theorists within social psychology during the late 1950's and early 1960's.¹⁹

The recent revival of functionalism in mass communications research, and its growing attractiveness to students of political communication,²⁰ may be attributed, in part, to its being widely perceived as a viable alternative to the beleaguered effects model which also allows its devotees to pursue many of the issues which had been important research questions in the earlier tradition.²¹ Indeed, the shared concerns of the current brand of functionalism and the traditional effects model are so great that several writers have suggested the desirability of a synthesis of the two positions.²²

For whatever reason, it is clear that the current formulation of functionalism--labeled "uses and gratifications research" or "gratifications research"--is the most popular "new" position in mass communication studies at the moment and is bidding to become so in the study of political communication. Many of the researchers referred to earlier who took the critique of the traditional position seriously and cast about for an alternative have embraced, in varying degrees, the uses and gratifications perspective. Much of the intellectual vitality of the field is currently centered on this approach, and an assessment of the promise it offers requires treating the approach in some detail.

A Characterization of the Uses and Gratifications Perspective

It is difficult to characterize economically the commitments of the uses and gratifications perspective because those commitments are not totally clear and are themselves matters of dispute. Compounding the difficulty are the tendencies of some uses and gratifications researchers to view their approach as essentially atheoretical²³ while others use the approach as a rubric under

which to effect a broad eclecticism, combining concepts derived from several quite diverse theoretic positions. Still others deny the functional underpinnings of uses and gratifications research altogether,²⁴ although in so doing they ignore the intellectual origins of the position as well as the nature of most research which labels itself "uses and gratifications."

Given the diversity of commitments housed in this general perspective, uses and gratifications presents itself as more a set of beliefs informing research practices and data interpretation than a precise, well-defined position. The first of these beliefs appears to be that persons must be conceived as active agents in their encounters with communications, political and otherwise, rather than as the passive, mechanical responders depicted in the effects model of earlier research. Katz's dictum, offered in his prospectus for uses and gratifications research, has become a key assumption of the position:

The question that best sums up this classical approach, I think, is "What do the media do to people?" The direction I have in mind has been variously called the functional approach to the media, or the "uses and gratifications" approach. It is the program that asks the question, not "What do the media do to people?" but, "What do people do with the media?"²⁵

Second, while the structure of functionalism permits several levels of explanation, uses and gratifications researchers usually opt for the individual, psychological level. The unit of analysis is typically the individual person; his active, goal-directed communication behavior is explained in generally psychological terms by reference to concepts such as "need," "motive," "satisfaction," and "gratification." As Kjellmor notes, "in describing and explaining the consumption and uses of mass media, emphasis is placed on the receiver, his needs, expectations and relations to his environment. Consumption is seen as an activity satisfying certain needs. To expose oneself to the mass media is a form of adjustment to one's situation."²⁶ The underlying functional foundation of the approach may be seen rather clearly here. The bounded and interrelated parts of the living system--the individual--are conceived as operating to achieve system maintenance and to defend the integrity of system boundaries (through "need gratification," "adjustment to one's situation," and the like).

Third, the uses and gratifications perspective employs a more or less agreed upon model of mass communication use, in which individuals are conceived to use the media as either "natural" or "functionally alternative" sources of need satisfaction. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch systematize the model in this way: current uses and gratifications studies, they claim, are concerned with

- (1) the social and psychological origins of
- (2) needs, which generate
- (3) expectations of
- (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to
- (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in
- (6) need gratifications and
- (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones.²⁷

Finally, uses and gratifications researchers appear to share a general belief which informs their selection of research methods: "many of the goals of mass media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience members themselves--that is, people are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives in particular cases, or at least to recognize them when confronted with them in an intelligible and familiar verbal formulation."²⁸

Advantages of the Uses and Gratifications Perspective

The uses and gratifications approach offers two related and important advantages over the effects tradition. The first of these is rejection of the passive-mechanist view of audiences and acceptance of the insight that persons are best understood as active agents. As Carey and Kreiling explain,

uses and gratifications research rests upon the psychological principle that human perception is not a passive registering process but an active organizing and structuring process. Thus, gratifications sought by the audience are assumed to result from active psychological processes of constructing lines of action. . . . uses and gratifications researchers shifted the impact of mass media from the effects of producers' intentions to the effects of audiences' intentions, which are understood to depend upon sociological context and active psychological processes.²⁹

Although perhaps not fully implemented in its methodological apparatus, the uses and gratifications perspective is putatively committed to persons' intentions and projects, or lines of action, as the basis of its explanation.

This active view of persons articulates with fairly recent developments throughout the social sciences, including psychology,³⁰ sociology,³¹ political science,³² and speech communication.³³ In this sense, the uses and gratifications approach participates, at least potentially, in the exploration and elaboration of a non-behavioristic social science based on an intellectually stimulating and intuitively attractive view of persons and human action. While the study of mass communication effects, including political effects, has historically lagged behind theory development in the social sciences, the putative assumptions of uses and gratifications research may signal an end to the intellectual provincialism of these studies and allow uses and gratifications researchers to benefit from and contribute to the development of theory and research methods in the social sciences.

The second important benefit offered by the uses and gratifications perspective is methodological. This perspective has proven hospitable to a wide variety of research methods, and can accommodate those methods which are attentive to the meanings and intentions constructed by subjects. Hence, the uses and gratifications approach provides a framework within which research methods not founded in the logical empiricist conception of social science may be employed. Indeed, research strategies formerly rejected as "unscientific" by some--including ethnographic methods and the like--strongly recommend themselves to students of uses and gratifications. Such methods allow a sensitivity

to the intentions and interpretive practices of persons which was not possible under the conventional view of social science and its attendant conception of human behavior. Acceptance and legitimation of these methods may provide a rich resource for understandings based on recognition of the inherent meaningfulness of human action and, as such, represent a significant advance over traditional methods of political communication study.

These advantages commend the uses and gratifications approach to political communication researchers. The strength of that commendation must be tempered, however, by significant conceptual difficulties with which the approach is currently beset, along with the approach's failure to take its most basic assumption seriously.

Conceptual Problems in the Uses and Gratifications Approach

Many of the conceptual difficulties of the uses and gratifications approach stem from the tendency of some researchers working within this view to treat data as primary and theoretic questions as secondary.³⁴ Regarding uses and gratifications not as a theoretic position but rather as an organizing framework within which a nearly all-encompassing eclecticism may be effected also introduces conceptual confusion into the approach. Such eclecticism is often cited as an advantage of the approach. Blumler and Katz write, for example, that "the uses and gratifications approach is a research strategy that can provide a home for a variety of hypotheses about specific communication phenomena and a testing ground for propositions about audience orientations stemming from more than one sociological or psychological theory." They cite this feature of the approach as an outstanding strength.³⁵

By contrast, the arguments against eclecticism which follow are based on the assumed interrelatedness of theory, method, and data (including data interpretation) and the importance of conceptual coherence and consistency within theoretic positions. These assumptions have been forcefully argued for elsewhere and the claims which support them are well known;³⁶ consequently, the argument will be only adumbrated here.

Critics of the logical empiricist conception of social science have argued--successfully, in my view--against the traditional theory-observation distinction and in favor of the claim that theory permeates and structures all facets of the scientific enterprise. Aune argues, for example, that "experience . . . always requires interpretation; and it is always some conceptual scheme, however, rudimentary, and not virgin reality, that supplies the criteria by which an interpretation of experience is to be appraised."³⁷ In a similar vein, Elliott has demonstrated how "methods of data collection themselves construct reality" with specific reference to uses and gratifications research.³⁸ O'Keefe has summarized the conclusion of the argument: "the argument . . . is that observations are inherently 'theory-laden,' that 'facts' are not facts independent of a conceptual (theoretical) framework, and thus that there is no theory-independent observation language."³⁹

These arguments inescapably suggest that theoretic assumptions, concepts, and terms are not merely abstract underbrush which legitimates research programs but rather determine such critical matters as the nature and purpose of

research, what counts as an explanation, what may be regarded as "data," and the particular manner in which data is to be interpreted. Qualities of consistency, precision, and the like thus become prerequisite to the favorable evaluation of any theory. If theoretic assumptions are inconsistent or unidentifiable, or if theoretic concepts and terms are ambiguous and imprecise, then inquiry based on the theory becomes chaotic. The theory does not unambiguously inform the research act; interpretations of data become wholly problematic; cogent evaluation of research findings, synthesis of disparate results, and assessment of the strength of the position are not possible.

Three sorts of conceptual difficulties plague the corpus of contemporary uses and gratifications research and severely limit its usefulness. First, the nature of the theory underlying uses and gratifications research is not totally clear. As we have seen, the intellectual origins of this research program as well as the typical uses and gratifications study are clearly functionalist. Recently, however, some have suggested that the connection between this approach and functionalism is not a necessary one. Blumler and Katz note that "if . . . the approach can be detached from its former functionalist moorings, then the way may be opened to relate the uses and gratifications approach even to conflict theory . . . and to ground it in non-utilitarian as well as utilitarian models of motivation."⁴⁰

McQuail and Gurevitch have argued, in fact, that uses and gratifications research could be pursued from any of three different theoretic positions: functionalism, a structural/cultural position, or an action/motivation position. Seen from these vantage points, the origins of media use would be conceived variously as the personality system with past and present social situations and opportunities (functional), as patterned by the culture and social structure (structural/cultural), and as the product of reason and change (action/motivation). Media exposure would be understood alternatively as "systematically related to needs and expectations through selective exposure and perception" (functional), as "predictable and regular" (structural/cultural), or as "selective; varied; unpredictable" (action/motivation). The consequences of media use, in turn, would present themselves variously as "contribution to more effective performance of personality and social systems" (functional), as "consistency and continuity of individual-collective link" (structural/cultural), or as "self-enhancement and development" (action/motivation).⁴¹

The difficulty, of course, is that these positions are fundamentally contradictory. Acceptance of any one position necessarily excludes acceptance of the others. At the most elemental level, for example, each position has a distinctive view of the nature of persons and of the bases of human action. The functionalism of most recent uses and gratifications research, as we have noted, focuses on the individual conceived as a living system composed of interrelated parts. Human action is understood to have its origin within the individual system and to take as its purpose the maintenance of the system and the defense of the integrity of its boundaries. By contrast, a structural/cultural perspective focuses on the society or culture as its unit of analysis. Individuals are conceived as parts of the collective system, not as independent systems in themselves, and individual action is seen as ultimately originating in the structures of the collectivity. Similarly, the purpose of individual action is maintenance of the collective system, not maintenance of the

individual system. The action/motivation approach, on the other hand, turns attention back to the individual as the unit of analysis. The person is conceived in organismic but not necessarily systemic terms. Accordingly, action is seen as serving individual (as opposed to collective) purposes, but these purposes are not conceived as functions, since the individual is not defined as a system.

These three positions are thus mutually exclusive; each is rooted in a different view of human action. While terms such as "use" and "gratification" might be employed in each position, the meanings of those terms would be strikingly different in each position and use of a common lexicon across the positions would suggest a commonality that does not exist. The positions cannot be integrated because they are contradictory. By seeking to house contradictory positions within the uses and gratifications approach, the effect of the McQuail and Gurevitch proposal would be to empty the approach of all content, making it impossible for us to agree on what a uses and gratifications study is, much less to interpret findings of the research corpus. So conceived, the approach would be no more than a set of shared labels with no common meaning.

The McQuail and Gurevitch proposal is currently just that, for the most part, and uses and gratifications research tends to fit loosely within the functionalist position. The fit is indeed loose, however, and the current brand of research appears to be moving farther and farther away from the assumptions of functionalism. Perhaps the best example of this movement is the growing confusion over the meaning of the concept, "function." As Wright pointed out in his early argument for a functionalist approach to communication, "function" has historically had a rather precise meaning within this position: it has referred to processes which have positive consequences for and are necessary to system maintenance and survival.⁴² That precise meaning has been eroded in contemporary uses and gratifications studies, where we find a host of conflicting typologies of "functions" proposed because they label factors extracted from data, not because they bear any particular relation to system maintenance, and where we find no discussion of dysfunctions, the necessary complement to functions. If erosion of the meaning of "function" signals movement away from functionalism, the position which is to replace functionalism remains wholly opaque at this point. As a result, we are hard pressed to state just what the theory underlying uses and gratifications research is, and that is a conceptual difficulty of the greatest magnitude.

A second related difficulty is confusion and equivalence in the meaning of major concepts and terms employed in uses and gratifications studies. Equivalence in the meaning of "function" is one example of this problem. Similar concepts which are used loosely and without precise meaning include "use," "gratification," "motive," and "need." Rosengren provides a lucid example of this imprecision in the use of terms:

although the term "need" is often encountered in writings about uses and gratifications, [it] has not been subject to direct investigation within this tradition--and for a very good reason. This must be the task of biologists and psychologists. When the term "need" is introduced, then, what is typically meant is what has here been called problems or even motives.⁴³

The point is that it makes a great deal of difference which of these terms--need, problem, or motive--one uses. Each term refers to a specific concept which has a more or less concrete meaning; those meanings are not equivalent. For example, "needs" are structural requirements of an organism within functionalism; "problems" and "motives" are not. "Problem" suggests deficit motivation; "motive" is a broader concept. "Motives" and "problems" may arise from "needs," but need not always do so. Given the tendency to use these terms equivocally, how are we to know what the uses and gratifications program means when it claims media use originates in human needs? And how may we evaluate research projects which purport to identify and investigate those needs?

Failure to specify precise meanings for concepts so that they may be employed univocally and consistently creates confusion within the uses and gratifications position and may tend to make research employing such vacuous and amorphous concepts a self-validating exercise. For example, how may we investigate whether media consumption is necessarily gratifying if we cannot specify: (a) what a gratification is; (b) what the relation is between a gratification and a use; (c) whether a use is a motive, the result of a need, the statement of a function, or all three of these, or none of these; (d) what the relation is between a use and its necessary antecedent state--need, problem, motive, or whatever--if, indeed, a use has a necessary antecedent state; and (e) what exactly would count as a negative case which could not be explained *ex post facto* by our equivalent concepts? Until the concepts and terms which define the uses and gratifications approach are given precision and their relations are specified within some cogent theoretic structure, we will continue to be unable to evaluate particular research efforts and to know what we should make of the approach itself.

A final conceptual difficulty is considerable confusion over the underlying explanatory apparatus which presumably unifies the diverse lines of inquiry pursued under the imprimatur of uses and gratifications research. It is not clear (a) what are the necessary components of a uses and gratifications explanation, (b) how those components serve to provide a satisfactory account or explanation, or (c) how a uses and gratifications explanation differs from other accounts which might be offered to explain the same behavior. While the issues involved here are complex, analysis of a few key problems will suffice to identify the difficulty with which we are faced.

Much of the confusion over how a uses and gratifications explanation works centers around the fundamental but troublesome concept, media use. Differential patterns of media consumption--that which research seeks to account for--are thought to be explained by reference to the uses to which media exposure is put by audience members. Those who use the media for one purpose will presumably display a pattern of media consumption different from that exhibited by those who use the media for some other purpose. Within the uses and gratifications position, then, it appears to be the case that explaining media consumption is thought to require identifying media use; to identify the use is to account for the behavior.

Yet this explanatory concept is most vexatious. Research practices do not offer unambiguous answers to such questions as whether "use" is a psychological construct or a structural construct and whether "use" refers to a

cause (motive), an effect (consequence), or a process. Psychologically, we may think of media use as an intention or consciously framed goal; that is, "use" may be understood as an "in order to" motive. In this sense, persons "use" the media to achieve goals--be entertained, escape from anxieties, learn, and the like. Hence, to ask a person how he uses the media is to ask what his intentions are. Because intentions direct action, intentions may be thought of as preceding action. So understood, "use" is a psychological construct referring to conscious intentions which precede and direct media consumption.

"Use" may also be understood as a structural concept, however. Within the functionalist position, needs are generally understood as structural requirements of a system. These needs describe "functions" which must be fulfilled for system maintenance, such that fulfilling a function is equivalent to satisfying a need. In this sense, asking what a person uses the media for may be interpreted as asking what functions or needs are fulfilled by media consumption.

While uses and gratifications researchers assume persons are aware of their motives in using media ("use" as a psychological construct), there appears to be no compelling reason to assume persons are similarly aware of their structural requirements or needs. For example, we would not expect someone who uses the media to obtain ersatz or para-social interaction to fulfill his need for interaction with others to reply "obtaining para-social interaction" when asked why he uses the media. Rather, we would expect replies stating such intentions as "to learn about what is going on in the world," "to fill time," and the like. While subjects' self reports of intentions may serve as evidence for use understood as a psychological construct, we would not expect to employ self reports as evidence for use understood as a structural construct. Indeed, the concept of latent function refers to a type of use for which we would expect no conscious awareness in subjects.

There are more than methodological issues involved in whether use is understood as a psychological or structural concept, however. In the structural interpretation, media use explains behavior by locating its origin in a system's structural requirements or needs. In the psychological interpretation, on the other hand, media use explains behavior by locating its origin in conscious motives or intentions. While structural requirements may direct conscious intention, they certainly need not do so and, in fact, we would expect intentions to bear little or no relation to latent functions or deferred functions. "Need," moreover, takes on a different meaning depending on whether one employs the psychological or structural interpretation of media use. In the psychological view, "need" refers to experienced or felt difficulties, while in the structural view "need" refers to structural requirements of the system. As a result, studies which explain behavior by reference to intentions are employing an underlying explanatory mechanism which differs from that used in studies that explain behavior by invoking structural requirements of systems. To the extent that uses and gratifications research can accommodate both sorts of explanations, the nature of its explanatory apparatus is unclear.

Thus far, we have interpreted media use to mean a cause of behavior. At the same time, media use is often employed to mean the consequence of

behavior; that is, media use may refer to what media consumption is used for, to the consequences of behavior. All would be well were it not for the fact that consequences of behavior are not always congruent with the needs or expectations which gave rise to the behavior. In the psychological interpretation of "use," behavior is explicitly seen by uses and gratifications researchers to have unintended consequences. In the structural interpretation, functional researchers have often spoken of dysfunctions, of consequences which do not fulfill structural requirements. In both interpretations, then, the consequences of behavior are not always viewed as consistent with the causes of behavior. Accordingly, "media use" as cause may refer to something quite different than "media use" as consequence. Compounding our difficulty is the fact that "media use" may be taken as referring to the entire process, including experiencing needs, framing expectations of media, receiving media content, and finding that content gratifying.

As a result, it is difficult to know what the explanatory apparatus of this approach is. Without a precise apparatus, uses and gratifications "explanations" have tended to be vague and tautologous. Since the underlying explanatory concept is ambiguous, it may be used as evidence for itself. For example, it is possible to investigate the nature of "media use" as structural requirement by examining the nature of "media use" as consequence and reasoning backwards. This sort of teleological argument is a defect for which functionalism has often been faulted.⁴⁴ As Elliott has written, "the more one aspect of the process has to be used as evidence for another the more the argument becomes circular and unnecessarily complex."⁴⁵

Failure to Take the Active Perceiver Seriously

As we have seen, perhaps the most basic tenet of the uses and gratifications approach is that persons are active, not the passive, mechanical responders assumed by traditional research. In the uses and gratifications view, persons actively form intentions ("uses" understood as goals), create expectations of mass media, and construct lines of action in order to achieve gratifications. This sort of cognitive activity is thus an important, perhaps a definitive, part of the study of "what people do with the media."

On this view, the process of perception is one of the most basic ways in which persons are active: "human perception is not a passive registering process but an active organizing and structuring process."⁴⁶ This tenet leads inevitably to the conclusion that the content of mass communication is not given in messages by their producers and identified in the registering of observers and researchers, but rather is created by audience members in the active organizing and interpreting process of perception.

Perception is ultimately a key element in the uses and gratifications position. Audiences' perception of goals and expectations of media sources of gratification is thought by many to determine differential patterns of media consumption. Correlatively, the manner in which particular messages are used and whether they prove gratifying is assumed to be determined, at least in large part, by how those messages are interpreted or given meaning by audience members in the active process of perception. Presumably, it is this active view of persons, including their active perceptual or interpretive

processes, which unifies the widely variant forms of uses and gratifications research. And introducing personal interpretations or perceptions into the process of mass communication was a major departure from the effects tradition for which we should applaud the uses and gratifications approach.

It is thus both surprising and puzzling to realize that the uses and gratifications program has not sought to investigate how persons perceive and interpret the content of messages and whether those interpretations do indeed provide the expected link between needs, uses, and gratification. The typical uses and gratifications research design investigates nearly every stage in the process--need, goal or expectation, media exposure, consequence of exposure (gratification)--except the perceptual activity of interpreting or creating meaning for messages. As Carey and Kreiling observe in their argument for cultural analysis,

uses and gratifications research fails to link the functions of mass media consumption with the symbolic content of the mass-communicated materials or with the actual experience of consuming them. . . . Uses and gratifications researchers . . . have done an unproductive about-face by dropping any attention to symbolic content. Or, to the extent that content is treated as in any sense symbolic, it is so regarded only in the myopic sense that it may trigger psychological reactions or represent such sociological elements as values and role-expectations to which persons are thereby socialized.⁴⁷

While we may disagree with Carey and Kreiling's claim that attention to symbolic content requires a cultural perspective, we can hardly deny their characterization of this research program as generally inattentive to what messages mean to perceivers.

By failing to inquire into interpretive processes and the meanings they yield, uses and gratifications researchers are leaving the presumed link which ties together their vision of the mass communication process unexplored. Additionally, they may be denying the putative fundamental assumption of their position and returning to the view of meaning as given in content to passive receivers which informed the effects tradition in mass and political communication. For only if we assume perception to be a passive process of apprehending unproblematic content are we relieved of the necessity for investigating meaning created in perception. Because of the importance of perception to the entire uses and gratifications edifice, this failure may be taken as a critical defect of the approach, at least in its current formulation.

At present, then, we must be suspicious of the credentials of the uses and gratifications perspective for candidacy as a profitable new approach to the study of political communication. Much remains to be done if the approach is to cohere as a precise and cogent theoretic position, as we have seen. The need at this point is not for more data to further confuse matters, but rather is for rigorous conceptual analysis. Concepts and terms must be defined; their relations must be clearly specified within a theoretic framework; the key assumptions of the approach, including the assumption of an

actively perceiving audience, must be identified and consistently implemented in the conceptual edifice.

At the same time, our evaluation must be tentative, for like any new position, the uses and gratifications approach is rapidly evolving. Many of the difficulties we have identified are current being thrashed out and may ultimately be resolved in ways which will make the approach more useful. Until that happens, however, it seems ill advised to embrace this perspective as clearly the path we should follow.

Looking to the Future: Two Priorities

The two lines of activity which largely define the field of political communication at present--the new effects research and exploration of concepts derived from the uses and gratifications perspective--will doubtlessly continue to be popular in the immediate future. The purpose of this paper is not to urge abandonment of these research programs, but rather is to suggest two priorities in research and theory development which warrant our attention.

First, the importance of conceptual analysis must be recognized. A theme woven throughout this discussion has been that methods of inquiry and particular research questions can be neither productively employed or intelligently selected apart from the theoretic tapestry which informs them and within which they appear as reasonable. Both trends in political communication research--the statistical sophistication of the new effects research and the talk of the uses and gratifications of political communication--have been characterized in this analysis as inattentive to conceptual problems. That inattention, as we have seen, inevitably produces significant difficulties which undermine the integrity of the research act.

Moreover, these difficulties cannot be resolved by the conventional resort to further studies and more data. As O'Keefe has argued,

careful reflective analysis can bring conceptual difficulties to light, can induce the clarification of a theory's claims, concepts, and methods, and can lead to maximally productive research efforts. . . . To the extent that unclarities, confusions, and contradictions are uncovered in a theory, one should be wary; an incoherent theory will surely not provide a clear understanding of human communication. And this critical analysis . . . should not be conducted in the solitude of one's study or in the limited forum of the seminar room; it should be public inquiry, itself open to criticism. What must be encouraged is public discussion of theoretical approaches to communication. Without such critical analysis communication theorists will doubtlessly be lost in an increasing mass of confused and unconnected "empirical findings," still vainly hoping that "more research" will provide all the answers.⁴⁸

Given the interrelation of theory and the research act, it will not suffice to define ourselves as researchers who may leave theoretic wranglings to those calling themselves philosophers and theorists; theory informs what we all do and in a real sense we are all theorists. Conceptual analysis should be a priority for us all.

The second implication of this paper is that the active view of persons, placing perceptual and interpretive processes at the center of study, is an important advance over the effects tradition with its passive-mechanist view of persons. This view is receiving increased attention in the social sciences, and it commends itself highly to those of us interested in political communication. The strength of the uses and gratifications approach is that it represents groping toward this view; the weakness of the approach is that it fails to take this view seriously in its theory and research.

There are a variety of perspectives which are rooted in an active view of persons. One such perspective is described in Gurnell's summary of a phenomenological view:

The phenomenological perspective may be understood as embracing commitments to the logical and methodological asymmetry of explanation and concept formation in the natural and social sciences, the second-order character of social scientific inquiry and its epistemological symmetry with other second-order studies such as philosophy, the need for the elucidation of the concept of action, and the thesis that the phenomena of social science are primarily symbolic in character and that for the most part, despite the existence of objectified and institutionalized structures, what is to be taken as "social reality is made up of the meanings which actors on the social scene give to their actions and to their situations."⁴⁹

The as yet incompletely articulated constructivist approach to political communication is a second perspective committed to this view of persons.⁵⁰ Another alternative is a symbolist position as explored by Edelman,⁵¹ Nimmo,⁵² and others. Also, the uses and gratifications approach may ultimately come to take the active view of persons seriously and achieve some conceptual precision and cogency. Whatever the specific formulation researchers adopt, the insight that persons are active, hence that they constitute resource rather than merely topic for our investigations, may be an important advance in the emerging study of political communication.

While this paper is predominantly critical in tone, these two implications are offered as a constructive contribution to the continuing dialogue over what the study of political communication should become.

Footnotes

¹The two classic monographs produced under the aegis of Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research are, of course, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, The People's Choice (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), and Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, Voting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

²Seminal reports of researchers in the Michigan Survey Research Center's Political Behavior Program (now the Center for Political Studies) include Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Warren E. Miller, The Voter Decides (Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson, 1954), and Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, The American Voter (New York: John Wiley, 1960).

³Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1960). An early version of this work was distributed by the Bureau of Applied Social Research in 1949.

⁴See, for example, Bernard Berelson, "The State of Communication Research," Public Opinion Quarterly, 23 (1959), 1-6.

⁵Elihu Katz, "Mass Communications Research and the Study of Popular Culture: An Editorial Note on a Possible Future for this Journal," Studies in Public Communication, 2 (1959), 1-6.

⁶Joseph T. Klapper, "Mass Communication Research: An Old Road Resurveyed," Public Opinion Quarterly, 27 (1963), 315-27.

⁷Daniel J. O'Keefe, "Logical Empiricism and the Study of Human Communication," Speech Monographs, 42 (1975), 169-83.

⁸Frederick Suppe, "The Search for Philosophic Understanding of Scientific Theories," in The Structure of Scientific Theories, ed. Frederick Suppe (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 119, 162. See also Eugene F. Miller, "Positivism, Historicism, and Political Inquiry," American Political Science Review, 66 (1972), 796-817, esp. pp. 798-806.

⁹See, for example, William F. Brewer, "There Is No Convincing Evidence for Operant or Classical Conditioning in Adult Humans," in Cognition and the Symbolic Processes, ed. W. B. Weimer and D. S. Palermo (Potomac, Maryland: Erlbaum, 1974), pp. 1-42.

¹⁰Harold Mendelsohn, "Behaviorism, Functionalism, and Mass Communications Policy," Public Opinion Quarterly, 38 (1974), 379-89.

¹¹John G. Gunnell, "Political Inquiry and the Concept of Action: A Phenomenological Analysis," in Phenomenology and the Social Sciences, ed. Maurice Natanson, 2 vols. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), II, 197-275; see esp. pp. 197-221.

¹²Jesse G. Delia, "Constructivism and Credibility, Part I: An Analysis of the Credibility Concept," and "Constructivism and Credibility, Part II: Theory Development in Communication Research," mimeo, Department of Speech Communication, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1975. A portion of this analysis is presented in Jesse G. Delia, "A Constructivist Analysis of the Credibility Concept," Quarterly Journal of Speech (forthcoming).

¹³See, for example, James A. Taylor, George A. Barnett, and Kim B. Serota, "A Multidimensional Examination of Political Attitude Change," 1975 International Communication Association Convention paper.

¹⁴Katz, "Mass Communications Research and the Study of Popular Culture."

¹⁵Charles R. Wright, Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective (New York: Random House, 1959), and "Functional Analysis and Mass Communication," Public Opinion Quarterly, 24 (1960), 605-20.

¹⁶Klapper, "Mass Communication Research."

¹⁷Mendelsohn, "Behaviorism, Functionalism, and Mass Communications Policy."

¹⁸See, for example, Herta Herzog, "Professor Quiz: A Gratification Study," in Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Radio and the Printed Page (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), pp. 64-93.

¹⁹See, for example, Daniel Katz and Irving Sarnoff, "The Motivational Bases of Attitude Change," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 49 (1954), 115-24; Daniel Katz, "The Functional Approach to the Study of Attitudes," Public Opinion Quarterly, 24 (1960), 163-204; Daniel Katz and Ezra Stotland, "A Preliminary Statement to a Theory of Attitude Structure and Change," in Psychology: A Study of a Science, ed. Sigmund Koch, 6 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), III, 423-75; and Herbert C. Kelman, "Compliance, Identification, and Internalization: Three Processes of Attitude Change," Journal of Conflict Resolution, 2 (1958), 51-60, and "Processes of Opinion Change," Public Opinion Quarterly, 25 (1961), 57-78.

²⁰See, for example, Maxwell E. McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns: Information, Gratification, and Persuasion," in Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research, ed. F. Gerald Kline and Phillip J. Tichenor (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1972), pp. 169-94.

²¹The locus of interest in current functional research largely remains centered on mediating processes standing between needs and communication exposure, along with subsequent consequences or "gratifications." Such conventional issues as selective exposure, for example, continue to receive attention in current functional research, although in a slightly reinterpreted fashion.

²²See McCombs; also see Jack M. McLeod and Lee B. Becker, "Testing the Validity of Gratification Measures Through Political Effects Analysis," in The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research, ed. Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1974), p. 138.

²³Philip Elliott has pointed to such atheoreticality in "Uses and Gratifications Research: A Critique and a Sociological Alternative," in Blumler and Katz, p. 256.

²⁴See, for example, Denis McQuail and Michael Gurevitch, "Explaining Audience Behavior: Three Approaches Considered," in Blumler and Katz, pp. 287-301.

²⁵E. Katz, "Mass Communications Research and the Study of Popular Culture," p. 2.

²⁶Staffan Kjellmor, "Basic Subjective Broadcasting Media Functions," in Uses and Gratifications Studies: Theory and Methods (Stockholm: Audience and Programme Research Dept., Sveriges Radio, 1973), p. 3.

²⁷Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, "Utilization of Mass Communication by the Individual," in Blumler and Katz, p. 20.

²⁸Ibid., p. 22.

²⁹James W. Carey and Albert L. Kreiling, "Popular Culture and Uses and Gratifications: Notes Toward an Accommodation," in Blumler and Katz, p. 227.

³⁰See, for example, studies of impression formation based on Kelly's personal construct theory [George Kelly, The Psychology of Personal Constructs, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1955)] and the growing influence of attribution theory [Edward E. Jones, David E. Kanouse, Harold H. Kelley, Richard E. Nisbett, Stuart Valins, and Bernhard Weiner, Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior (Morristown, New Jersey: General Learning Press, 1972)].

³¹See, for example, Paul Filmer, Michael Phillipson, David Silverman, and David Walsh, New Directions in Sociological Theory (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1973).

³²See, for example, Gunnell.

³³See, for example, Delia.

³⁴As Elliott observes, "the attention given . . . to uses and gratifications theory should not obscure the fact that it is basically a very atheoretical approach. On occasion its protagonists are inclined to turn this into a virtue, taking the line that if it can be measured it exists, and if it can be associated it is significant" (p. 256). Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz note that uses and gratifications may be regarded by some as "simply an approach to data collection" and speak of "the lack of a uses and gratifications theory as such" ("Foreword," in Blumler and Katz, pp. 14-15).

³⁵Blumler and Katz, "Foreword," p. 15.

³⁶In the communications literature, see, for example, O'Keefe; also see Delia. An instructive case study in the importance of theoretic assumptions, conceptual consistency, and conceptual precision is provided by the colloquy between Hawes and Grossberg and O'Keefe [Lawrence Grossberg and Daniel J. O'Keefe, "Presuppositions, Conceptual Foundations, and Communication Theory:

On Hawes' Approach to Communication," 195-208; Leonard C. Hawes, "A Response to Grossberg and O'Keefe: Building a Human Science of Communication," 209-19, and "Theoretic Pragmatics and Scholastic Exegetics or Will the 'Real' Schutz and Brodbeck Please Sit Down," 319-20; and Daniel J. O'Keefe and Lawrence Grossberg, "Theoretical Clarity and Interpretive Social Science," 320-22, Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61 (1975)].

³⁷Bruce Aune, Knowledge, Mind and Nature (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 83.

³⁸pp. 256-59.

³⁹O'Keefe, p. 174.

⁴⁰Blumler and Katz, "Foreword," p. 16.

⁴¹McQuail and Gurevitch, p. 298.

⁴²Wright, "Functional Analysis and Mass Communication."

⁴³Karl Erik Rosengren, "Uses and Gratifications: A Paradigm Outlined," in Blumler and Katz, p. 272.

⁴⁴See, for example, Kingsley Davis, "The Myth of Functional Analysis as a Special Method in Sociology and Anthropology," American Sociological Review, 24 (1959), 757-72.

⁴⁵Elliott, p. 251.

⁴⁶Carey and Kreiling, p. 227.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 232-33.

⁴⁸O'Keefe, p. 181.

⁴⁹Gunnell, p. 222.

⁵⁰Explorations and partial statements of this position may be found in Delia, in David L. Swanson and Douglas N. Freeman, "Political Construct Subsystems as an Approach to Political Communication: A Preliminary Report," 1975 Central States Speech Association Convention paper; and, in most rudimentary form, in David L. Swanson and Jesse G. Delia, The Nature of Human Communication (Palo Alto, California: Science Research Associates, 1976).

⁵¹Murray Edelman, Politics as Symbolic Action (Chicago: Markham, 1971), and The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

⁵²Dan D. Nimmo, Popular Images of Politics (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975).